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Reagan Softens Tone on Soviets

Drops Condition That They Return to Arms Talks Prior to Summit

By JACK NELSON, *Times Washington Bureau Chief*

WASHINGTON—President Reagan, under increasing pressure to hold a summit meeting with the Soviet Union, softened his tone Thursday and said he is "ready, willing and able" to meet with Soviet President Konstantin U. Chernenko but that so far the Kremlin's leaders "have been unwilling to respond."

Declaring that the Soviet Union need not return to nuclear arms control negotiations before a summit meeting could take place, Reagan said he is engaged in "quiet diplomacy" that could "establish a basis for talks" with the Soviet leader. But he cautioned that a mere "get acquainted" summit could lead to exaggerated expectations and disappointment.

In keeping with his conciliatory tone, the President also for the first time reversed the position of the 1980 Republican platform and said it would be "counterproductive" for the United States to seek more than equality with the Soviets in nuclear arms. "I would prefer that we not ask for superiority now that we've entered into and started this whole area," he said.

No 'Political Games'

Going further than ever before to meet calls from both Republicans and Democrats that he adopt a more conciliatory approach to the summit question, the President dropped his previous insistence that a summit be preceded by virtual guarantees that they would end in concrete agreements. Walking a fine line on a potentially explosive political issue, he held himself out as eager to communicate with the Soviets while at the same time making it clear that he blames Moscow for the absence of any personal contact between the leaders of the two nations during his presidency.

Asked whether a summit could be held before the election, Reagan said: "I'm not going to play political games with this subject and go rushing out for some kind of political advantage to announce that I have asked for a summit meeting.

That wouldn't do either one of us any good and certainly wouldn't be fair to them. . . . The door is open. And every once in a while, we're standing in the doorway, seeing if anyone's coming up the steps."

Reflecting the Administration's uneasiness on the summit question, however, a senior Administration official said the President had not really abandoned his requirement

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